

## Tom Waits - Mule Variations (1999)

Written by bluelover

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1. *Big In Japan* 2. *Lowside Of The Road* 3. *Hold On* 4. *Get Behind The Mule* 5. *House Where Nobody Lives* 6. *Cold Water* 7. *Pony* 8. *What's He Building?* 9. *Black Market Baby* 10. *Eyeball Kid* 11. *Picture In A Frame* 12. *Chocolate Jesus* 13. *Georgia Lee* 14. *Filipino Box Spring Hog* 15. *Take It With Me* 16. *Come On Up To The House* Tom Waits - vocals, The Voice (8), Guitar, Piano, Organ, percussion, Chamberlin, Optigan Andrew Borger - drums (9, 14, 16), Percussion (14) Kathleen Brennan - Boner (14) Ralph Carney - Trumpet (1), Sax (1, 16), Alto-Sax (11), Bass Clarinet (10), Reeds (8, 9) Les Claypool - Bass (1) Greg Cohen - Bass (11, 12, 15), Percussion (10) Linda Deluca-Ghidossi - Violin (13) Dalton Dillingham III - Bass (13) Joe Gore - Guitar (3, 16) Chris Grady - Trumpet (2, 14) John Hammond - Blues Harp (7) Stephen Hodges - Percussion (3, 4) Smokey Hormel - Guitar (4), Dobro (7), Chumbus & Dousengoni (2) Jacquire King - Programming (2, 14) Larry LaLonde - Guitar (1) Brain Mantia - Drums (1) Christopher Marvin - Drums (6) Charlie Musselwhite - Blues Harp (4, 12, 14, 16) Nik Phelps - Bari-Sax (11, 16) DJ M. Mark "The Ill Media" Reitman - Turntable (8, 9, 10, 14) Larry Rhodes - Contrabassoon (10) Marc Ribot - Guitar (3, 9, 10, 14), Lead Guitar (5), Guitar Solo (6, 9) Jeff Sloan - Percussion (8), Boner (14) Larry Taylor - Bass (3, 4, 5, 6, 14, 16), Guitar (14), Rhythm Guitar (5) Wings Over Jordan Gospel, Bali Eternal - Turntable Samples (10)

What Tom Waits does to the blues is something like what newspapers do to bright colors — in the way that a picture of the Sistine Chapel's ceiling ends up looking like roast beef in the morning edition, Waits' arty, seasick imagination turns a rural American song form into a garish, surreal fantasy.

Mule Variations, Waits' first studio album in six years, contains the most blues of any album he's made. When he plays the Southern hayseed, he wants you to feel the chicken wire, breathe the dust, see the sunsets. The amazing thing about Waits is that he's still offering up his affectations like a new singer-songwriter on the first time out, still dreaming up wild, desperate fantasy scenarios of lawless small-town America during the B-movie era. Not only are there no

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malls in Tom Waits' world, no computers or sport-utility vehicles, but here people cook pigs on overturned beds ("Filipino Box Spring Hog"), stir their brandy with nails ("Get Behind the Mule") and have their own curio museums ("Eyeball Kid").

If you don't buy Waits' maudlin gusto, this record won't change your mind. But if you're a fan — especially of his 1992 album, *Bone Machine* — you'll get your long-awaited fix. Continuing *Bone Machine*'s experiments in artfully scuffed sound (though, regretfully, doing away with the first-take immediacy of the earlier record), Waits has found DJs this time to help him build his sonic doghouses, with scratches, hisses and gabbling field recordings. And Waits, as producer, has made his lurching stomps sound like they were deep-fried before they reached the mastering plant.

There are some fine songs here, especially "Take It With Me," a ballad about the strength of memory after the dissolution of a relationship that states the obvious in a particularly beautiful way. The problem is that it's more of the same; Waits seems to have peaked as a songwriter with 1985's *Rain Dogs*, and he's still writing outtakes from that record. (Too many of his rattled-off story-blues numbers on the new album sound like "Gun Street Girl"; too many of the ballads sound like "Time.")

Through his film roles in the Eighties and Nineties and the simultaneous rise of an alternative culture that lionizes him, Waits has become the apotheosis of the American eccentric. We don't demand much from these figures, other than that they spill out their visions in chunks of an ongoing discourse; *Mule Variations* is just the latest installment of that discourse, and one wonders when Waits, who's not lacking for bold, dislocating ideas, might treat himself to a new start. ---Ben Ratliff, [rollingstone.com](http://rollingstone.com)

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